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Active Duty to Civilian Life: How to Ease the Workplace Transition

REVIEWED FEB 27, 2007

Civilian soldiers—reservists and National Guard members—leave families and stateside jobs to serve half a world away to help fight the war on terror. They face risks their co-workers can only imagine, and they experience directly what their co-workers see only secondhand, if at all. When they return, they can come back profoundly changed to a workplace that has stayed more or less the same.

For reasons like these, it's not always easy to make the transition back to civilian life and employment. Under federal law, they have the right to their old jobs, if their employers are still in business. But even if that part of the re-entry goes smoothly, the emotional side may be rockier. Workplaces contain social networks, with relationships and roles that can be disrupted by someone's long absence. Co-workers need to be aware that a civilian soldier's return from a long tour of duty is nothing like coming back from a vacation. And they can do certain things to help the returning soldier re-adjust.

Be ready to talk—and listen

One of the dangers for a returning soldier is isolation, which makes returning to normal life more difficult and can make other problems—alcohol abuse, family conflicts, stress—harder for others to detect and deal with. And it's not hard to see why someone who has spent a year in a theater of combat would feel little in common with old colleagues who spent that time at their desks.

Ken Mroczek, a team leader at the Tucson Vet Center of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, says returnees have “left their workplace and their friends, and they have had this pretty impactful experience that is much different from what their co-workers have experienced. They come back feeling different—feeling like they've changed and the people behind them have stayed the same.”

Just as these different experiences create a gap, communication can help close it. Co-workers should be ready to talk and, most of all, listen. They should make it clear that they are interested in what the returning soldier has to say about his experiences. And the soldier has to see that they are comfortable hearing the stories.

Developing a truly receptive attitude may take some effort, says Mroczek, a psychologist and Vietnam veteran. This may be a particular hurdle for co-workers who don't approve of the

soldiers' mission. "If you're uncomfortable with hearing about combat, or with some aspects of the war, you're not going to be receptive," Mroczek says.

What about talking politics? With something as controversial as the United States' mission in Iraq, opinions around the office are bound to differ. But co-workers need to remember that, whatever their own views, the returning soldier has seen firsthand what they have only seen through the filter of the news media. Soldiers often comment that what they've seen in the field is radically different from what they see on the news. Whatever their views, civilians should at least be respectful listeners.

Roll out the welcome mat

Like anyone returning to a familiar place after a long absence, soldiers want to know if people are glad to see them return. Co-workers should let them know, without having to be asked.

Kelly Barnett, a psychologist and counselor in civilian life and a chaplain in the Army National Guard, says the first step in helping soldiers re-adjust to civilian life "is to express appreciation in some sort of way." Just how to do this depends on the individual, Barnett says. "Some soldiers need more of a pat on the back than others." Also, Mroczek says the show of appreciation has to fit the personality of the person being celebrated. Some may love being the object of an office party. Others may be embarrassed. But Barnett and Mroczek say it's important to make the point that co-workers are happy to have their old friend back, and that they're grateful for the sacrifice the soldier made.

Recognize that "normal" life isn't normal yet to the returning soldier

Civilian life can take some getting used to. What people take for granted can be a shock, even if pleasant, to the returnee. After his tour in Afghanistan, Barnett remembers being amazed at the multitude of choices on a typical restaurant menu; it was quite a change for someone who had been in a place where the choices boiled down to two—either eat what's given to you, or don't eat at all. He says returning soldiers may also have trouble at the workplace in adjusting to a new idea of "normal."

A soldier may have been accustomed to giving orders when on active duty, and now has to get used to taking them. Military life can either be highly structured or highly fluid and unpredictable. In either case, the soldier may come back to a different type of workplace. Even the pace of work might be a shock. Barnett says a soldier in the field may have learned to work at a deliberately slow pace to avoid being hurt, and then has to re-adjust to a workplace where rush jobs are routine. In this case, co-workers should be understanding and give the soldier some time to relearn the civilian work style.

Recognizing signs of trouble

How can co-workers tell if a soldier is having a rough transition? Barnett says trouble may show up as outbursts of anger, difficulty focusing on tasks or isolation from co-workers.

On the other hand, Mroczek says too much attention to possible trouble can lead to problems. “If you’re in an environment where you feel you are being watched, that can make you uncomfortable.” And if co-workers do think something is wrong, he says, the soldier may only listen to those who are close friends.

What every returning soldier should know is that, when and if they need it, help is available. In addition to the workplace and employee assistance programs, there are veterans’ centers that are open to returning veterans. Barnett says co-workers can also call a local National Guard or reserve office—or other soldiers they may know—to get advice on helping a returning soldier who seems to be going through a rough patch.

Resources

Back From the Brink by Don Catherall. Bantam Books, 1992.

Veterans’ centers provide readjustment counseling and other services to returning veterans. For a directory of the more than 200 veterans’ centers nationwide, go to www.va.gov/rsc/VetCenterDirectory.htm.

The Department of Veterans Affairs also has a Web page specifically for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan operations at www.seamlesstransition.va.gov/index.asp.

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